

Transcript available below

## About the speaker

**Stephen Ulph** is a member of the board of the Westminster Institute and Senior Fellow with The Jamestown Foundation. One of the preeminent analysts of the Islamic world, Mr. Ulph specializes in the analysis of jihadist and Islamist ideology and regularly lectures on aspects of Islamist and Jihadist ideology impacting on Western democracies and the course of the war on terrorism. He is the founder and former editor of Islamic Affairs Analyst and Terrorism Security Monitor for Jane's Information Group.

His publications include an analysis on jihadism in Syria for the CTC, an ideological analysis of the 'Virtual Border Conflict' (the online arena for Islamist extremism) for The Borders of Islam, an in-depth examination of the relationship of Islamism to other totalitarian systems of thought in Fighting the Ideological War, and a 4-part reference work, Towards a Curriculum for the Teaching of Jihadist Ideology, available online at the Jamestown Foundation. He is also the Director of The Reform Project and its bilingual website Almuslih ('The Reformer' [www.almuslih.org](http://www.almuslih.org)) which supports Arab reformist writers and promotes their work to an English language readership.

He also spoke at Westminster on the subject of [The Importance of Muslim Reformers](#).

## Transcript

Stephen Ulph:

Right, thank you. I just want to pick up on that very interesting last point that Patrick made. We have left the field. Who is going to do this? Who is going to engage in this ideological warfare? One of the problems as you all know is how to embark on such a thing. There is a lot of resistance. One of the basic lines of resistance is [that] it is an internal Muslim affair, and then we have this sort of reticence that we should not, especially as non-Muslims, we should not engage in this.

Among Muslims too there is another problem because there is a hermetically sealed universe that the Islamist radicals are living in, and they cannot easily penetrate through that themselves because what actually happens is that any debates tend to dissipate in endless Qur'anic verse and hadith wars. This is why deradicalization initiatives have very mixed results, usually varied results, so what we are looking for ideally if we can find one is a neutral debating ground where we Muslims and non-Muslims alike are not being wrong footed, okay?

So we need some way to force the Islamists to bother to undertake the debate in the first place, but obviously, they feel they do not need to, so I am going to possibly resolve these concerns by coming up or bringing up a comparative approach, which may be the most effective. That is the comparison between Islamism and the various historical manifestations of totalitarianism and what I wanted to do

here is to explore how some deeper mental mechanisms may allow us a point of entry into deconstructing the threat.

Now, you are probably aware this has been subject of some controversy. There have been objections to the idea that you in the same paragraph you might mention the word Islam or Islamism and a word such as fascism. This has been a very thorny issue. I personally have experienced some rather rough rides when I brought up the subject in the same paragraph, but I think we have to, you know, take courage and just push, push on this.

Question of observing the common mental trajectories. The key to all of this is to try and find the common ground and the way it is useful is that it argues by using the terms of reference of the extremists themselves, the uniqueness of their model, the divine origin that they claim for their ideology, and the uniqueness of the political applications of this, so we want to put question marks to this point that Patrick importantly flagged up, the authenticity preoccupation.

How solidly founded is that authenticity? Why? Just to recap, why is authenticity important? While military reverses can always be brushed aside, and they often do by saying, well, it is a long-term struggle. It is not something which a defeat on the battlefield makes no particular difference here or there, but ideological justification cannot brook defeat at any point not at any second and a basic building block for that is the resilience that comes from authenticity.

It is the key. It is their moral authority is their yardstick for determining what is true and counterfeit Islam and why they should be listening to anyone in the first place. It is based, as Patrick mentioned, on the words and deeds of the virtuous predecessors, the salaf assalihoon (السلف الصالح), or the Salaf assalih, and the reason why that is important is that they are the pattern to be emulated.

They are the authentic pattern because they predate the compromises made in Islamic medieval and modern history with grubby compromises of mandate power, so they keep a nice purity to them and it is a very handy way of maintaining an authenticity and Salafi or the Salafist groups are the intellectual cradle in which groups such as Al Qaeda, who call themselves jihadi Salafists, that is the intellectual cradle that they are born in.

So, it allows them to justify their position because they are commanded for instance to imitate the prophet and the prophet, of course, was fighting a jihad so QED, following the precedent is outlined in the text, the hadith and the sira literature, the biography literature, means that they are more authority than the other Muslims and finally, they do not therefore have to worry about what scholars will say because they are collaborators. They have been got at by the world system, so who are they to talk to us anyway? That is the problem we are faced with, so what is it that could damage this claim to authenticity?

The only thing that I can think of is the basic no-no, which is behaving like the infidel. The aim of the comparative approach is to demonstrate that. Therefore, their ideology does not, despite their claim, represent a pure, unmingled, standalone truth, but is a typical product of a broader spectrum of an all too human speculation.

You know we have all had some experience on Islamism and the ideology. We know the names, people like Sayyid Qutb. What do we pick up from these? We pick up some basic points such as a disengagement from contemporary culture and social relations, the promotion of a single, supreme ideology as a universal explanation, the goal of transforming not only the political and social order, but the very intellect of the individual, the promotion of communal over individual rights and the gradation of rights based on loyalty to a belief system, and the vehement opposition to democracy, pluralism, liberal thought, etc.

Now, of course, a lot of us here as Westerners will find these things interestingly familiar from our own historical experience. There are, in fact, many who would begin to point out that there are areas where you could make a parallel with and these are the areas I am referring to. I will just pick a few illustrative points.

For instance, the crisis is important, the crisis of the contemporary world. This is a very common feature of totalitarian ideology. It is always a response to some form of failed values of the liberal society, a society which is disastrously atomized, pluralistic, and purposeless.

Now, to remedy this crisis entails more than reform, it means a total abolition of the failed system and I think you are familiar with phrases from Sayyid Qutb, who argues that mankind is on the edge of an abyss and his work *Milestones* features this in detail.

Marxism-Leninism also taught that human nature must be transformed in order to pave the way for a glorious disworldly paradise, very interesting terminology, and this is the feature that gave it an air of pseudo religiosity. The fact that there was a religious dimension to politics was openly claimed by totalitarian leaders. Benito Mussolini said, "Fascism is a religious concept," and he did not mean that in any sense of a metaphor.

In this type of sacralized society, all systems that accommodate the individual will must be repudiated because that is a selfish element, so they were now going to have to live in a collective identity, an indivisible one that links you altogether in one group. Mussolini defined this as where the state would function as one organic whole, a system of interrelated parts that possess value only as they work towards a whole. It is not a society of individuals, it is individuals building up a collective whole.

And of course, the interesting point is that Sayyid Qutb down below mirrors this conception almost to the letter. The thing is, of course, that the Islamists have an extra advantage because they can add divinity to the argument because democracy is an expression of positivist law, and therefore it must be a direct negation of religious truth, so the concept of legislation by the voice of the people is now a false religion, a false, competing religion.

And the ultimate villain is what Qutb called the "hideous schizophrenia." This is the disastrous trajectory which Christianity took, according to Sayyid Qutb, by separating faith from the state. Now, the interesting point about this and the way it impacts on authenticity is Sayyid Qutb genuinely thought that this was unique to Islam, that this comprehensiveness was something which guarantees the authenticity of their program. But it is actually an illusion.

National Socialists in Germany, Leninists, shared the same disdain for the separation of the public and the private lives like a hallmark of the liberalism, which they despised. They argued just as vehemently for their systems being complete ways of life which entered into every area of human activity. For Hitler, he used the term Gleichschaltung, the coordination of every possible aspect of life in Germany for the purpose of eliminating this individualism. And here the radical Islamist Maududi actually made this comparison quite explicit.

Now, when we focus on the comparison between Islamism and fascist totalitarianism, we see some more, closer parallels. You see, just to take up a few points of this, take authenticity. It is the key element as I mentioned, and the fundamental element of this is to have the restoration of a lost vigor, something has gone wrong in history, something has been lost. Where for the Italians it meant restoring the ancient Roman vigor, in Germany it meant the re-Aryanization of European civilization. For the Islamists it is the restoration of (as Patrick mentioned) the community of the early Muslims, and by doing this they will retrieve God's favor and they will get that winning formula back, the winning formula which led Muslims to conquer the world, reproduce that, and we are back on a roll again.

Now, against this, of course, there are the evil machinations of the constant enemy. We are all very familiar with the idea of the conspirator against all of the totalitarian systems, but in fact, in the case of Islamism the matrix is very highly developed as you can see, the top of the list being Jews as you can see.

But the parallels are much, much deeper than that because they also reflect the idea of the internal enemy. Jews were useful in the German system because they lived both inside and outside the country, but for the Islamists I should say their Eternal Jew is the Eternal Conspirator of the Muslim. Here you have an example of it. This is the Al Qaeda Al-Neda website, affiliated with Al Qaeda, detailing where the real threats lay. They do not really, again, Jews are taken as read, but the real threat comes from secularizing Muslims.

Now, we also have the issue of the hero and the permanence of the struggle. This is an interesting element. This is a very important feature of fascism. Mussolini as it says mentions that, "Fascism is something that repudiates pacifism" as such because the life is lived for the struggle. And you can see how the Islamists reflect this quite closely, especially the interesting quote at the bottom here, "For this reason the Muslim is alive." The whole identity for the Muslim is to fight, according to the Islamists' ideology.

Der ewige Kafir

Der ewige Kafir, the eternal infidel, this underlines again the authenticity principal. We are dealing with something which – they are focusing on an eternal conflict. They are the only people who have the authentic formula to combat it. And this is the interesting point because in fascism there was always a problem in reconciling the contradiction between an eternal struggle and an ultimate, Armageddon conflagration.

It was never able to be clarified, but Islamists have done this, and they have done it because they can go a stage further. They do it because yes, it is for a worldly gain, it is to create a worldly kingdom, but it

is also a cosmic struggle at the same time. It has existed for forever and it will continue to exist. The bottom quote is from Sayyid Imam. He had sort of reputed jihad, but only technically. That is still his fundamental viewpoint, all that.

### Sacralized Politics

Alright, now we come to an important point because it is quite easy for those who hear that argument to say, well, no, hang on, Islam is a religion. It is not a political ideology, and also it is pretty unfair for you to be focusing on Islam like this. So let us deal with that one and knock that one on the head.

Here we have an example of clerical fascism. This is types of Christian groups in the 1930s that combined traditional theologies with a totalitarian ideology. They are various shades of collaboration with fascistic regimes. The problem, the slight problem here, is it is not a brilliant example. The Croatian one is a more extreme example. But you could argue that these were really cases of very conservative religious groups that seem to have absorbed the political ideology of fascism of its time, so it does not quite make the grade.

This one does. This is the Legion of the Archangel Michael, the Iron Guard. These people constructed their fascistic system from the ground up steeped in the language of Orthodox Christianity. The interesting point about the Iron Guard is that you can see the elements of the way they speak. This is the religious ideology. But look at the fascistic nature of the terminology and how they express themselves. But this was not merely imported from fascism, this was built from the ground up.

A very interesting example, here we have fascist Germany where there was a movement called Positives Christentum, which is positive Christianity. And you can see the same things are happening again. You have a renewal. It is very important to pick up on the vocabulary here, renewal towards an authentic Christianity, remodeled as an Aryan, and then remodeled into a new form of a new type of birth.

This is its modern form in positive Christianity in the United States. I have quite wickedly put the Arabic terminology to see how these things relate to each other. Dīn wa Dawla [means] no separation of church and state, nonsense of separation of that. Al Dimuqrattyā Dīn [means] democracy is a religion, again, this idea that it is not just a political system, it is a competition against God. So all of these agnostics and atheists are forming a common rival to the faith.

Tawhid al-Hakimiyyah [is] the idea that there can only be rule by God, a form of theocracy. It is when the holy spirit is allowed to flow into the office of government. [There is] al-Ta'ifa al-Mansurah [that means] victorious denomination. I am picking up these jihadist terms because they fit very closely, very snugly. And you define it by looking at scripture. You can find anything you wish. Knights Under the Banner should stir a few memories. You have the God of Power and Authenticity.

So you can see how the same [ideas manifest themselves]. You have got this fascistization of religious belief and you can fit it into this scheme. Under this system, when the kingdom comes, there is no more separation of church and state. The modern heresy of democracy is abolished, and society is organized on biblical lines. Now, just to cover our bases here fully, it is possible that critics will then say yes, but this is fascistic influence [on] religion, this is not really the real deal.

So we can move now perhaps to a third level. This is an example of European Christian movements of the Late Medieval/Early Modern Period. This is now politicized faith. It starts as faith even more than the Iron Guard. This is something which is constructed molecularly, bit by bit, from the text. At this time, there appeared a group of Christian believers who erected what has been termed the first European fascistic system.

Now we are entering into a different mental universe than the one we are familiar with, but it is Western, it is native to us, it is Christian, but there are some interesting familiar points. You can push the comparison a bit too far because these are not statistically significant compared to Islamists, but if you go into this area, you find a similar trajectory of development.

The Anabaptists, for instance, were a group of reformers seeking Christian reference points in a process of sacralizing politics. It was a pietistic movement, but it did involve a breakaway of violent political expression. I have picked one of many, but this document sort of forms almost like a manifesto. And you can see the language is beginning to become familiar, the “community of God,” the idea of martyrdom, self-sacrifice, blood, and you can see how it soon becomes associated with violence, bit by bit.

Hijra

You even have Hijra. You even have the idea of migration away from the evil world, which is the Islamist system. And this is Heavenly Jerusalem that they are going to build. And you can see that what they are doing is the same type of language you will find. In their particular case, the Mecca-Medina is Strasbourg and then it moves up to Münster. Münster is the beginning of the new Jerusalem from which they will expand.

The same thing is happening again, repudiation of secular systems. Anybody who studies what the Islamists believe in notices that the very important element is to disassociate from any office or function which has anything to do with the evil, secular systems. You have got similar type of language there.

You even have al-walā' wa-l-barā' (Arabic: **الْوَلَاءُ وَالْبَرَاءُ**). You even have this idea of disassociating yourself from the non-believer, to separate themselves from the wickedness because of the fear of contamination. Again, I am slightly forcing this comparison because this is not a statistically significant group, but you can see the trajectory of thinking is analogous.

Here, you can see what the basic building blocks of the system are. If you make the mutatis mutandis, if you change the vocabulary, you will sort of get the same type of thinking. I will just run through a few more. There is an effective sort of manifesto. Jan Matthys was the Bin Laden-type figure who was less ideological and more focused on violence.

And I wanted to compare it with Juhayman al-Otaybi, the chap who was involved in the Mecca siege. Admittedly, it is proto jihadism in the modern sense because it has a doctrine of the Mahdi, which jihadism does not have, but looking at his Rasa'il Saba', the seven letters, the manifesto of demands made to the Saudi government at the time, there is very little you need to do to adjust the vocabulary. And you can see how it follows the same lines.

And most amazingly for certainly a Christian group, you have the open espousal of violence in the cause of the new Jerusalem, a new community. Effectively then, in the Anabaptists, you can more or less, without too much wrinkling, determine the structures and the starting points of present-day jihadism because all of these things can be found and reflected. [There are] different degrees of emphasis, but they are there in any case, takfir, al-walā' wa-l-barā', al Hijra, and even a program for world domination. That was a little bit of a pipedream because it was going to start from the city of Münster and build outwards, but the idea was there.

### The Levels of Parallel

So in summary, we can make a comparison on three levels. First of all, with the sacralized political totalitarianisms. We listed the crisis of the contemporary world, a global universalist cause found in Genesis, that sort of rebirth of a new man, a new anthropological revolution, the sacralization of the community, and importantly the lack of separation between the public and private. Collective rights trump individual rights, that is a matter of course. With fascism, of course, we had important elements of authenticity, the call to tradition, the conspiracy obsession, and the hero and the constant fight, the constant struggle.

On a second level, we saw how religious belief has been meshed historically with the ideology of fascism through that process of sacralizing politics. And on the third level, we saw a very pure case as it were of the trajectory of piety to militancy, building from the ground up, and building it via the scriptures, selectively chosen, of course, and also chosen to project an idea that you should go back to the biblical environment, go back to the biblical text. By doing so you will reconstitute God's grace and you will be favored in your piety, so therefore you will be physically favored in this world, not just in the kingdom, in the next world to come.

So what I wanted to make clear was the approach of comparative totalitarianism, and comparative fundamentalism as well, I think is one of the most powerful tools to fight radicalism that we have. I think, frankly, it is one of the only ones that we can engage in ourselves from where we start without having to defer to, first of all, having an elaborate training in Islamic law, so it is a very important starting point for us.

Why it does this [is] because it resolves this problem, the specious argument that it is not our business to get involved, or it is an internal discussion. We do have the right to do it because we are not talking about Islam, we are talking about ourselves, we are talking about our own historical experience. And all we are saying is why don't you tell us why this is dissimilar. Also, it makes sure that there is a case for a debate to be held in the first place.

If it can be conclusively proved that the ideology of the Islamists demonstrates identical patterns of thought to man-made infidel political systems, then, well, to me it certainly means that the claim to divine sanction is severely if not terminally compromised. The Creator, frankly, should be able to bring something new to the table than what some twentieth century, tawdry totalitarians could come up with.

They are forced on to a neutral ground. This is very, very difficult to find. If you keep on trying to argue with them in a textual universe, you are going to lose because they are eminently detached from

you, whereas now they have to debate in an area where we at least are at least the authority, so we do not have to defer on that one, that front. And the discussion can just as well, even if there is resistance to engage in it, we can start this discussion unilaterally.

If we start this discourse (by the way, it seems to be very totalitarian, it seems to be very fascistic), if we do it with confidence, and stop worrying about being shouted down by somehow politically incorrect type of language, if we do it with confidence and we establish what it is we are talking about, we are talking about intellectual mechanisms, we are not talking about jackboots, we are not talking about nation-states, we are not talking about race theories, we find that we are able to force this debate to take place.

It means that we can engage in this debate without having to be at a disadvantage, being wrongfooted, whether we are Muslim or non-Muslim, if we are being wrongfooted by the textual talk because as Patrick was saying, at least the problem with Islam is that the texts are so numerous that you can really just drown in a sea of hadith and Qur'anic verse wars. This is the area where the Islamists feel most confident, in the realm of the text.

So if we force them out of this logos sphere, we force them out of this world of the word, they are then vulnerable to attack and they are vulnerable to losing the argument. It means that they must examine mindsets and motivations in place of what is a lazy, moral abdication to the letter of the text. They now have to deal with another way of thinking, and that is usually the death note.

Mansur gave, by the way, the example that Patrick gave, speaks of the way that he lost his jihadism because he found himself reading works on the nature of thought, and the history of thought, and reading works penned by Arab authors outside the textual tradition. It was a killer to his self-contained mental universe.

## Conclusion

So just to conclude, obviously, this sort of thing cannot fully explain the phenomenon, nothing can, but it is very interesting to be able to highlight these common intellectual trajectories that are shared amongst the Abrahamic faiths because by sharing something in an Abrahamic system, you are already on some sort of familiar ground with them.

It served to illustrate how religious and spiritual principles can interweave with the worldly and the political. It can be done. It is not something which is unique to Islam. We can see how the sacred and the profane can be profaned, and the profaned can be sacralized, and how a dissident sectarianism can easily slip into a murderous political extremism.

Now, the keyword again [is] authenticity. In a system which strenuously defines itself as authentic, uniquely Islamic and divinely sanctioned, a comparison like this demolishes these pretensions because it demonstrates that most of the core features, not just the fringe features, most of the core features of Islamism and, of course, militant jihadism are manifestations of a commonly found deviation, and this commonality, I would argue, deprives the Islamists all of their authority, it deprives them of their justification, and their cause.